

Highest Ranking Veteran Elected to Congress Highlights Penn and Drexel Programs at Veteran Education Forum

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MEDIA, PA – At a forum at the University of Pennsylvania to spotlight Veteran education programs there as well as at Drexel University, Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) announced new legislation today that will help our returning Veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan put their military training toward a college degree. The Congressman's bill would permit all students to count training courses from the military as credit for equivalent coursework at schools across the country. He also highlighted other key efforts on behalf of student Veterans to better help them transition into civilian life: the inclusion of vocational post-secondary education programs under the GI Bill and addressing the recent difficulties with GI benefit backlogs. Tomorrow, Congressman Sestak will host a similar forum in Pittsburgh at 9:45 AM. At this forum, he will address his new legislative efforts and recognize the program offered by the University of Pittsburgh to help young veterans succeed.

The Congressman detailed that his legislation would permit enlisted members of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard to participate in programs of higher education at the Community College of the Air Force – a one-of-a-kind program that allows students to transition military training into academic credit and receive associates degrees. Currently, only Air Force enlisted members and enlisted members of other services who are serving as instructors at Air Force training schools are eligible to receive associates degrees from the Community College. Unlike most other trade schools, the Community College of the Air Force is regionally accredited; meaning its credits are generally honored by four-year institutions.

"Assistance in obtaining a college degree is critical to ensuring the smoothest possible transition to civilian life for our Veterans," said Congressman Sestak. "I am proud to have worked to help pass a 21st Century GI Bill worthy of their sacrifices, but one item that has been overlooked is the proficiencies they have acquired, such as artisan skills, through military training. Our Nation's bias against trade schools should end and our service members should be able to receive academic credit and degrees wherever possible."

During the forum, the Congressman addressed former service members, and was joined for a forum by Diane Sandefur, Director of Penn's TRIO Veterans Upward Bound Program, which prepares students for post-secondary education, and Jeff Linskens of Drexel's Yellow Ribbon

Program, which has committed \$2 million to offer free education to an unlimited number of military veterans across all of the University's programs.

To further promote higher education for returning Veterans, the Congressman also highlighted the Post 9/11 Veterans Job Training Act of 2009 (HR 3337), which he has co-sponsored to allow Veterans to pursue vocational training programs – from police academies to welding to culinary arts – under the GI Bill. Currently, the post 9/11 GI Bill, unlike every other GI Bill, does not provide any benefits for Veterans participating in on the job training or apprenticeship programs.

The Congressman's ongoing efforts build on his work to pass the historic investment in Veterans college education in the 110th Congress as well as a letter to local universities last fall urging them to do everything possible to support and work with students participating in the GI bill program. His continued support for a 21st Century GI Bill comes as thousands of young Veterans, returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, continue to face delays in processing their education benefits. The Congressman noted that he has observed through his District Office that students have had difficulty receiving payments in a timely manner.

"I am pleased that VA Secretary Eric Shinseki recognized this problem and announced that by 2 October a contingency plan to offer Veterans temporary relief in the form of up to \$3000 advance payment until this backlog could be made manageable," said Congressman Sestak. "We must ensure a smoother application process, in part by listening to colleges and our returning Veterans through events such as this one. We have seen what happens when Congress does not take seriously problems our Veterans face as they begin to surface, and when the government is either slow to react or does not learn from its mistakes. Our returning Veterans have earned the benefit of a post-secondary education, health care, assistance purchasing a home and support in finding employment as they transition to civilian life.

"Many of our returning Veterans have been subjected to multiple combat tours and if we are serious about acknowledging the unique strains they have experienced, we will create and administrate programs and processes that do not add to their stress and frustrate them in their attempt to continue their education and find productive, stable employment, advantage of their health care, and if possible, provide their family with the home of their dreams. It is important to remember that we are in an economic crisis and these courageous young people have gone to war for us. If they cannot get their training and education -- they cannot get a job. Without an education and a job they will lose hope.

"From Delaware County Community College to the University of Pennsylvania and at the

dozens of gatherings I have hosted for Veterans and their families their message to me is clear – they want to be our next great generation. To do so they need the same help and hope that our returning heroes from WWII received. We were not so kind to our Veterans from Korea and Vietnam and we must never make that mistake again.”

Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, the Congressman was the first Director of Deep Blue, the Navy’s anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the Global War on Terrorism. He served as President Clintons Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Congressman Sestak is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the U.S. Congress.